Residents don masks as smoke and ash fill the skies: No time to breathe easy as fire keeps burning

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With a storm of smoke and ash raining down on Loreto Plaza, Chaucer's Bookstore owner Mahri Kerley stocked up on particulate masks Thursday afternoon to keep her employees from suffering from respiratory problems when they walk out into the thick, smoky air. She didn't have to travel far to get the masks; humanitarian aid organization Direct Relief International set up a booth in the plaza Thursday afternoon to distribute free N95 masks to residents who have been having problems breathing the hazy, smoke-filled air. Masks were also distributed at Lazy Acres Market on Meigs Road on Thursday.

Ms. Kerley, who was evacuated from her Mission Canyon Heights home after the Jesusita Fire broke out Tuesday, also grabbed a mask for herself. Just walking outside, she said, made her sinus problems flare up and caused her to struggle to breathe.

"On (Wednesday afternoon) with the winds, the smoke was just horrendous," she said.

DRI spokesman Jim Prosser said that if the county Public Health Department deems it necessary, the organization will also distribute the masks today in order to assist residents who must be outdoors while the fire burns. And with a heightened amount of people reporting that they have had difficulty breathing as a result of the dangerous air quality, that may come to pass.

DRI, said Mr. Prosser, has a "standing inventory" of about 40,000 masks, and about 10,000 more have been ordered. Both adult and pediatric masks are being distributed in the area.

The organization was allocated up to $50,000 in emergency funds to stock up on fire-relief supplies, said Mr. Prosser.

"The air-quality measures deemed (the mask giveaway) necessary," said Brett Williams, an emergency response coordinator with DRI.

"We're gearing this more for people who have respiratory issues and people who have to be outside," said Mr. Prosser. "We're really trying to reach those who are susceptible right now."

Although the masks are available to anyone who needs one, DRI officials say that people who have existing respiratory or heart conditions, including people with asthma or emphysema, or who are in a "high-risk" population, such as the elderly, are advised to wear one outside while the air quality poses a health risk.

The county Public Health Department, which asked DRI to distribute the masks, advises that "if there is hazy air or the smell of smoke in the immediate area," residents should stay indoors with their windows and doors closed and should avoid vigorous physical activity, especially outdoors.

Animals, too, should be kept indoors as much as possible, as the smoke-filled air can pose a threat to these residents as well.

"If you have a respiratory or heart condition that is causing coughing, shortness of breath, wheezing, chest pain or other symptoms, call your physician and consider leaving the area," the Health Department advises residents, adding that people with medical emergencies should call 911. The masks, the department said, "should be used for essential required outdoor activities."

For Santa Barbara resident Mary Moreno, who was forced to evacuate from her home on Wednesday, being outside is something she hasn't been able to avoid. Mrs. Moreno stopped by the DRI booth on Thursday to get masks for herself, her husband and the Swiss foreign-exchange student who's staying with the couple while
she attends Santa Barbara City College.

While Mrs. Moreno ran errands Thursday afternoon, she experienced tightness in her chest and headaches from the smoky air. The mask, she hopes, will make it easier to breathe.

Although the European student has not yet suffered adverse effects from the poor air quality, experiencing her first California wildfire made her "scared to death," Mrs. Moreno related.

Marco Pena, who lives in downtown Santa Barbara, said that if the fire continues to rage on, he will wear the mask that he received from DRI on Thursday.

"I'm downtown where all the smoke's blowing," he said. "At night, it's just like it's snowing downtown."

For DRI, the mask giveaway is, sadly, becoming a routine event. The organization also distributed masks during the Tea Fire in November 2008, the Zaca Fire in 2007 and the Gap Fire in July 2008.

"The whole year is fire season now," said Mr. Prosser.

The recent outbreak of swine flu, too, has been adding a tremendous demand for masks.

DRI has been equipping both local clinics in California and in Texas with masks and other medical supplies to prevent the spread of the disease.

According to Mr. Williams, like their name suggests, the masks shield 95 percent of particulate matter if they are worn correctly. DRI is also distributing directions for usage with the free masks.

But for her part, Ms. Kerley's worries about air quality may pale in comparison to her concerns that she may now be homeless. She has not received any information on whether her home is still standing since she was forced to evacuate.

"I don't know whether I have a house or not," she said.

According to the Public Health Department, the Jesusita Fire Call Center can assist residents who need evacuation assistance, as well as medically fragile residents who need transportation to an evacuation site. The center can be reached at 681-5197.

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